CITIZEN AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

CONTENTS

Draft Citizen and Community Engagement Policy 2025

PURPOSE

The Citizen and Community Engagement Policy Statement sets out how Oxford City Council engages its citizens and communities in decision-making. It provides the framework for how the Council engages with citizens and communities to develop a greater understanding of their needs and facilitate meaningful involvement in the decisions that affect them.

POLICY CONTEXT

This Policy Statement is underpinned by the Cabinet Office's guidance on Consultation Principles (March 2018)[1] and sets out the framework for how the Council will deliver activity in support of the priorities within the Council's Corporate Strategy 2024-28.

This policy aligns with new obligations under the Social Housing Act, particularly in the areas of tenant engagement and the protection of tenant rights. It sets forth how the Council will fulfil these obligations through enhanced engagement and service improvements tailored to tenant needs.

It should be read in conjunction with the following related Council documents:

- Corporate Strategy 2024-28
- Constitution
- Thriving Communities Strategy 2023-27
- Citizen Experience Strategy 2023-25
- Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy
- Consultation & Engagement Toolkit
- Public Involvement Project Brief Template
- Question design guidelines.
- Statement of Community Involvement

This Policy Statement supersedes the Community Engagement Policy Statement 2014-17 and the Consultation Strategy 2010-13.

KEY DEFINITIONS

> **Engagement –** the act of involving or seeking feedback from citizens and communities.
>
> **Consultation –** the act of exchanging information and opinions about an issue, proposal, or decision to reach a better understanding of it to decide or reach a conclusion.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance [accessed 14 December 2023]

Citizen – "citizens" are those who live, work in, and visit the City Council and/or the City of Oxford.

Community – having defining characteristics such as place, identity, or interest in common.

Online Activities – engagement which citizens and communities interact with on a digital platform, including consultations, questionnaires, or surveys.

Stakeholder – a citizen or community with an interest, concern, or 'stake' in an issue, proposal, or decision.

INTRODUCTION

Oxford City Council recognises that communities and citizens possess valuable insight, experience, and capabilities that should play a significant role in shaping local government decisions.

As such we are committed to nurturing strong, inclusive communities where active community and citizen involvement is at the forefront of our decision-making.

As a dynamic city where different community identities intersect, the Council recognises that effective engagement must reflect this complexity. While individual communities have their unique characters, they broadly relate to one or more of the following:

- Communities of Place – People living in specific geographic areas of the city.

- Communities of Identity - Groups who share commonality in their sense of self, such as ethnicity, age, disability, religion, or sexual orientation.

- Communities of Interest – Individuals connected by shared activities or interests, including students, business and academic visitors, Council tenants, allotment holders, cyclists, theatregoers and users of parks, roads, community buildings, or public transport.

This Policy Statement seeks to deliver on that commitment through effective engagement, ensuring that all voices are heard and facilitating participation in the Council's decision-making processes.

This involves working with communities and citizens to build supportive channels for dialogue and engagement to enhance the relationship and accountability between citizens, communities, and the Council, which in turn leads to better and more sustainable outcomes.

The Council has a longstanding commitment to engaging with citizens and communities about the decisions that affect them and has adopted a proportionate and targeted approach to enable views from diverse groups and communities to feed into the decision-making process.

BACKGROUND & OXFORD CONTEXT

Oxford is a vibrant and diverse city, shaped by both unique opportunities and significant challenges. While its economy is powered by knowledge, innovation, and tourism, stark inequalities persist across the city. Oxford's population continues to grow, yet it remains one of the least affordable places to live in the country. At the same time, the climate emergency presents an urgent and ongoing threat. Understanding Oxford's citizens and communities is central to Oxford City Council's approach to engagement; however, the 'Oxford context' is outlined in detail within other related Council documents (*as referenced in the 'Policy Context' section*). To avoid duplication, this information is not repeated in this Policy Statement.

The Council engages with citizens and communities in a variety of ways, including through:

- **Oxford's 48 City Councillors** – They provide a direct link between citizens and communities and the Council's decision-making mechanisms. One of City Councillors' most important roles is advocating and being a voice for citizens and communities, which includes raising enquiries with Council officers on behalf of individual citizens.
- **Residents' Panel** – A dedicated panel of Oxford residents, broadly representative of the city's population, that provides regular input on a range of issues and helps shape Council decisions and proposals.
- **Annual Residents' Survey** – An online survey sent to the Residents' Panel each year, giving Oxford residents the opportunity to share their views on a range of topics including how the Council is performing and what they think about the services we provide.
- **Online Consultation and Engagement Portal** – A platform where residents can comment on Council proposals and documents, including policy and strategy documents, as well as the annual budget. This platform is also used by the Council to publish engagement outcomes and share feedback with participants.
- **Planning Involvement** – The *Statement of Community Involvement* sets out the Council's approach to involving the community and stakeholders in shaping planning policy documents and decisions on development proposals in Oxford.
- **Localities Team** – A team that brings together the skills and experience of Council staff and partners to support residents, address local needs, reduce inequalities, and build strong, resilient, and thriving communities. This includes hosting fortnightly online learning sessions open to community groups and organisations that support local people.
- **Public involvement at Council meetings –** Community representatives and individual citizens can regularly speak at Full Council, Cabinet, Planning

Committee, and other meetings of Elected Members, using their right to raise issues and share their views directly with decision-makers.

- **Tenant, Leaseholder, and Shared Ownership Engagement –** recent national reforms, including the **Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023** and the **Consumer Standards (2024)**, have placed greater emphasis on empowering tenants, leaseholders, and shared owners. These reforms make it a statutory requirement for councils to involve residents in shaping the housing services they receive and to be accountable for their performance.

  Oxford City Council's **Tenant Involvement Team** ensures compliance with these requirements, promoting meaningful engagement with tenants, shared owners, and leaseholders through a range of channels and initiatives:

  - **Independent Tenant Satisfaction Survey** - Conducted annually with an external partner, this survey measures tenant satisfaction and enables the Council to benchmark performance against similar authorities.
  - **Tenants in Touch** – A quarterly magazine for tenants, focused on topics that matter most to residents and designed to keep them informed and engaged.
  - **Annual Report** – Produced each year to report on landlord services, including key statistics and compliance with the Consumer Standards and housing regulations.
  - **Focus Groups** – Regular sessions with tenants, leaseholders, and shared owners to explore service improvements and identify priorities, which are central to improving customer experience and value for money.
  - **Task and Finish Reviews** – Short-term reviews requested by service managers to investigate specific concerns and help enhance service delivery.
  - **Resident Ambassador Meetings** – Monthly meetings with a core group of engaged residents to discuss reports, outcomes, and ongoing challenges.
  - **'You Said, We Did' Reporting** – Collation and communication of engagement results across service areas, ensuring transparency, accountability, and follow-through on resident feedback.
  - **Resident Recruitment and Outreach** – Ongoing efforts to involve more tenants and leaseholders in engagement activities. Resident involvement is seen as essential to improving Council services.
  - **Community Engagement Activities** – The team also supports and delivers wider engagement events such as roadshows and drop-ins, often prioritised through internal service commissioning.

PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

The Council's principles of citizen and community engagement are designed to be broad and flexible enough to reflect the diversity of Oxford, ensuring that engagement activities are as inclusive as possible. This includes making sure our consultation and

engagement practices fully consider individuals' protected characteristics, as defined by the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty.

The Council has also voluntarily adopted the Socio-Economic Duty under the Act. This means that decision-makers must consider relevant evidence and the potential impact of strategic decisions, with the aim of reducing inequalities that arise from socio-economic disadvantage. In doing so, it is essential to give due regard to the views and lived experiences of Oxford's citizens and communities.

The Council's principles of citizen and community engagement, outlined below, adhere to the Gunning Principles, which provide a robust legal foundation for meaningful public consultation. While more detailed information is available on the Local Government Association (LGA) website (see also the 'Further Reading' section of this document), the Gunning Principles can be summarised into four core principles:

- Consultation must take place before decisions are made
- Sufficient information must be provided to allow for informed responses
- Adequate time should be given for consideration and response
- Consultation responses should be conscientiously considered in decision-making

The Council's Principles of Citizen and Community Engagement are:

1. **Flexibility**
   The Council will adopt a flexible approach to engagement, enabling open and sustained conversations with citizens and communities. The type and breadth of engagement will vary depending on the issue and the stage of development of the proposal or decision. This flexibility allows the Council to learn and act quickly.

   Engagement activities may take a variety of forms – from online consultations, questionnaires, and surveys to public meetings or feedback gathered through service delivery.

   To ensure effectiveness, the Council will identify the appropriate individuals, groups, or communities to engage at each stage of a proposals or decision's development.

2. **Proportionality**
   The type and scale of citizen and community engagement will be proportionate to the potential impact of the proposal or decision, and the degree to which it can be influenced.

   For instance, localised issues affecting a small area of the city may involve a smaller-scale, targeted engagement, and more collaborative decision-making. On the other hand, citywide issues may require broader engagement activities; in these cases, while the Council is often the decision-maker, the views of

citizens and communities will be an important part of the decision-making process.

Some engagement activities, particularly statutory consultations, may also be subject to predetermined requirements (e.g., citywide scale).

3. **Transparency and Clarity**
Engagement activities will have clear objectives — setting out the proposal or decision being considered, its stage of development, and how it aligns with the Council's broader strategic aims.

The scope of the engagement will be clearly defined, including what elements of the proposals are open to influence and what decisions have already been made. The Council will be transparent about how input can shape outcomes, and what the next steps will be, to help manage expectations of citizens and communities.

Sufficient, accessible information will be provided to support informed participation. Relevant materials will be made publicly available in a timely manner. The Council remains committed to sharing balanced, transparent, and objective information to help citizens and communities understand the issues.

All general communication channels (e.g., the Council website, Tenant Portal, newsletters, social media, posters) and more targeted communications (e.g., emailing lists, community networks, direct outreach) will be used, as appropriate to the audience and issue.

4. **Timeliness**
Engagement will begin at the earliest appropriate stage in the development of a proposal or decision when the matter is still under consideration and there is a meaningful opportunity for influence.

Engagement timelines will be proportionate and realistic, allowing enough time for thoughtful participation. If engagement takes place over holiday periods, the Council will assess and mitigate any negative impact on participation. Typical timeframes for engagement range from two to twelve weeks, depending on the nature of the proposal/decision and the capacity of communities to respond. Each engagement period will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

5. **Feedback**
The Council is committed to capturing and using feedback from engagement activities to shape proposals and inform decisions. This helps ensure that decisions are well-informed, transparent, and reflective of the views and experiences of Oxford's citizens and communities.

In making decisions and developing policy, the Council will:

- Publish engagement results – Clearly set out the responses received through engagement activities and explain how these have informed the process. Results, including the number of responses, will be published within twelve weeks of the engagement closing, in line with relevant data protection legislation.

- Provide feedback to participants - Share with respondents how their contributions have influenced the proposal or decision, and maintain open communication channels for follow-up, including updates on final decisions and implementation plans.

- Ensure objective analysis – Assess all information and viewpoints fairly and impartially to ensure an accurate interpretation of the results.

- Be responsive to feedback - Take the voices of citizens and communities seriously and be prepared to revise plans where appropriate in response to engagement findings.

- Prioritise meaningful engagement - Ensure that engagement is given appropriate time, space, resources, and attention, with a genuine commitment to understanding and incorporating the views of citizens and communities into proposals and decisions.

6. **Inclusivity and Accessibility**

   The Council is committed to ensuring that all citizens and communities, including marginalised and under-represented groups, can participate in engagement activities. Inclusive engagement leads to better, more equitable outcomes and helps ensure that all voices are heard, especially those that are typically harder to reach.

   To maximise participation, information will be clear, easy to understand, and available in a variety of accessible formats. While the Council adopts a 'Digital by Design' approach to enhance accessibility, convenience, and efficiency through online services, it also recognises the importance of alternative methods. These include face-to-face appointments, telephone support, printed newsletters and letters, workshops, posters, leaflets, and public noticeboards, helping to prevent digital exclusion and ensure equitable access to engagement opportunities.

   Where appropriate, the Council will also carry out Equality Impact Assessments and convene policy review task and finish groups — particularly where proposals directly affect residents — to ensure equity is embedded in decision-making from the outset.

7. **Strengthening Tenant Voice**

   In line with the requirements of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act, the Council is committed to strengthening engagement with tenants and leaseholders. This

includes establishing regular opportunities for consultations, providing accessible channels for feedback, and ensuring clear, transparent communication about tenant rights and the ways they can influence housing services and decisions.

These principles are further elaborated in the **Consultation & Engagement Toolkit**, which offers practical guidance on applying the Gunning Principles to engagement processes. The toolkit includes resources such as the **Public Involvement Project Brief Template**, designed to help structure consultations to meet these standards. Staff and stakeholders are encouraged to use this toolkit when designing, implementing, and evaluating consultations, ensuring alignment with the Council's commitment to transparent and effective engagement.

INTERNAL INFORMATION-SHARING AND ENGAGEMENT COORDINATION

To avoid duplication of consultations and make the best use of citizen insights, the Council will establish and maintain a coordinated approach to information-sharing across departments. This ensures that feedback from engagement activities is easily accessible internally, and that departments align in their use of community and citizen insights.

1. **Centralised Data Repository:** A centralised repository will store engagement insights and feedback, enabling all departments to access data from prior consultations. This system allows teams to reference past engagements and reduce the need for repeated consultations on similar topics.

2. **Engagement Activities Tracker:** An internal tracker will document all planned and completed engagement activities, providing visibility of timelines across departments. This tool helps minimise the risk of duplicative outreach to the same community groups. The Consultation Officer and Communications Manager will meet monthly to review the tracker, ensuring that all engagement activities receive the necessary publicity and support.

3. **Citizen Engagement section in the Horizon Scan**: A dedicated section within the monthly **Horizon Scan** document will facilitate the sharing of engagement activities across departments, helping to minimise the risk of overlapping engagement efforts.

4. **Feedback Loop:** Each department will periodically share updates on how community insights have influenced decisions, projects, or policies. This transparency ensures alignment, reinforces accountability, and demonstrates the impact of engagement efforts across teams.

5. **Members Notification:** When commissioning community or citizen engagement activities, the Council will notify relevant ward members, particularly for localised engagements, and the portfolio holder responsible for the related policy or service area. This ensures transparency and provides an

opportunity for elected representatives to contribute local knowledge and context to the engagement process.

CITIZEN & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES

The Council engages with citizens and communities in a variety of ways, tailoring the approach to each specific case. The Council's primary goal is to create an inclusive and responsive engagement process that not only informs but actively involves citizens and communities in shaping the proposals and decisions that impact their lives. This collaborative approach enhances the quality and effectiveness of the proposals and decisions.

The Council's approaches to citizen and community engagement include:

- **Digital Engagement:** Utilising online platforms and social media to reach a wider audience and facilitate real-time interaction.
- **Local Media**: Informing the local media outlets, such as newspapers and radio stations, to share key council initiatives and engagement opportunities, particularly for residents who may be digitally excluded.
- **Public Consultations:** conducting surveys, public meetings, and workshops to gather diverse perspectives from a wide range of citizens, groups, and communities.
- **Collaborative Projects:** Partnering with local organisations, schools, and businesses to support community-led initiatives and enhance collective engagement.
- **Locality Learning Sessions:** Hosting local forums to discuss specific issues relevant to different areas of the city. These sessions aim to support residents, respond to local needs, reduce inequalities, and build strong, resilient communities. Locality Managers will utilise both Council-managed and independent venues, such as community centres, to facilitate accessible and tailored learning sessions that engage a broad spectrum of residents.
- **Youth and Minority Engagement:** Developing targeted programmes to involve young people and minority groups in civic activities. For example, the **Youth Voice Panel** gathers feedback from young people under the age of 18 to ensure their voices are heard.
- **Localities and Community Associations:** Leveraging community centres, including non-Council-managed centres, to reach broader groups of citizens and provide accessible pathways for participation.

The Council's engagement approach is further supported by the **Citizen Experience Strategy**, which outlines how the Council ensures a positive experience for citizens accessing its services and engaging with the Council. A key element of this strategy is the **Channel Management Plan,** which aims to streamline the various contact channels available to citizens. This plan focuses on optimising both in-person and digital channels - ensuring that residents who are more likely to be digitally excluded, such as older citizens, can access telephone or face-to-face support without delay,

while encouraging and supporting those who can use digital channels to do so. By improving the consistency and efficiency of these contact channels, the Council aims to create a better overall experience for citizens and improve demand management.

INCENTIVES

Incentives can be a useful tool for encouraging citizen and community participation in engagement activities. Where they are used, the following principles must be followed:

- **Participation-only requirement**: Respondents must not be asked to do anything beyond agreeing to take part in the engagement or consultation activity to qualify for an incentive.
- **No financial cost**: Incentives must not require participants to spend money. For example, discount vouchers should not be used, as these require respondents to pay the remaining balance. Monetary vouchers (e.g., gift cards) are permissible, as they do not require personal expenditure.
- **Data privacy**: Incentives must not be used to collect personal information. Any personal data provided (e.g., to deliver a voucher or enter a prize draw) must be stored separately from consultation responses and handled in line with data protection legislation.
- **Clear communication**: Participants must be informed in advance about the nature of the incentive, whether a cash alternative is available, how and when the incentive will be issued, and (if applicable) how and when winners will be announced.
- **Fair prize draws**: If a free prize draw is used, winners must be selected fairly and transparently, in line with the laws of chance. An independent draw process must be followed and supported by a clear audit trail. While the draw process will not be made public, an explanation can be provided on request.

DATA, DEMOGRAPHICS & INTELLIGENCE

The Council gathers a broad range of local data and intelligence, including demographic information, to support the delivery of services and inform decision-making. This data plays a key role in shaping proposals, identifying community needs, and designing inclusive engagement approaches.

All relevant data and insights are considered during the development of policies, services, and other decisions to ensure that they are evidence-based and responsive to the city's diverse population.

Much of this information is publicly available and published on the Council's website contributing to transparency and wider community understanding.

In addition, the Council collects valuable insight through its **Residents' Panel, Tenant Involvement Insights** and the **Annual Residents' Survey**, all of which help capture the views, experiences, and priorities of Oxford's residents. By tracking feedback over time, as is the case, for example, for the Annual Residents' Survey, the Council can better understand the impact of its decisions and adapt its approach to ensure it

continues to meet the' needs of citizens and communities. Regular reporting of these insights also helps maintain transparency and accountability, further strengthening the Council's commitment to equitable and inclusive engagement

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AT COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Council holds a range of meetings - including Full Council, Cabinet, Committees, Sub-Committees and Panels - many of which are open to the public. These meetings provide opportunities for citizens and communities to observe proceedings and watch local democracy in action. In most cases, citizens and communities can participate in meetings following relevant meeting procedures and the Council's Constitution.

Locality Teams support this process by helping to gather and represent community views where relevant.

Further details are available on the Council's website.

MONITORING AND REPORTING

The Council is committed to continuous improvement, and this applies equally to how we engage with citizens and communities.

To ensure engagement activities remain effective and meaningful, the Council will regularly monitor and review its engagement practices using tools such as the centralised data repository and the engagement activities tracker. This includes checking how well departments are using existing insights, helping to reduce duplication and avoid over-consultation.

Engagement outcomes will be reviewed, with departments expected to report on how feedback has shaped proposals or decisions. This process ensures transparency, accountability, and a clear link between citizen input and Council actions.

Established feedback mechanisms support this approach. Citizens and communities are informed about how their input has been considered and used — for example, through published engagement summaries and the 'We Asked, You Said, We Did' section on the Council's online consultation and engagement portal.

FURTHER READING

- Local Government Association (LGA) Guidance on consulting residents

- The Gunning Principles

- Consumer Standards 2024

- Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023